

Asiha Grigsby Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Asiha Grigsby served as a Peace Corps volunteer in El Salvador from 2013 to 2015 in the community organization and economic development program. She also served as a Peace Corps Response volunteer in Panama from 2016 to 2017 on a small business development project.

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Oral History Interview

with

Asiha Grigsby

September 23, 2018
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

GANZGLASS: [00:00:03] This is Evelyn Ganzglass, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. Today is September 23rd, 2018, and I'm interviewing Asiha Grigsby, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in two countries, first in El Salvador from 2013 to 2015 in a community organization and economic development program, and then in Panama in 2016 to 2017 in a small business consultant program. So Asiha, clearly you like the Peace Corps, but why did you join the Peace Corps to start out with?

GRIGSBY: [00:00:49] Peace Corps service was such a pleasure and a challenge for me, and what really sparked my interest in the Peace Corps was when I was in ninth grade, I was taking just basic Spanish and my teacher, Miss Color I believe was her name, spoke both English and Spanish, and I thought that was so cool. I said wow, I want to be a cool person and speak two languages because I just, it never dawned on me that people could speak more than one language. I don't know

why. But I wanted to be a cool person and speak a sexy language, and I said, Spanish is the one. And in my family, we are a family that really prides itself on serving others and serving our country. And it was a mandate for my siblings and I to serve in some way. So, you know, my siblings did various things, military service. They did different counseling services. My father was a military colonel in the Army and retired as an Army colonel.

GRIGSBY: [00:01:59] And so I chose Peace Corps service. I said, well, that will be my way to give back. And I followed suit. It was quite a dream come true, a hard-fought battle to get into the Peace Corps. But when I finally made it, I was so overwhelmed with the opportunity to serve and it's really stuck with me since then.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:21] Great. Good. So being a daughter of a colonel, I assume you traveled a lot.

GRIGSBY: [00:02:29] Quite a bit, yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:30] So where did you go to a high school?

GRIGSBY: [00:02:32] You know, my parents made a conscious decision, although we did travel when we were very young in our elementary school era. But my mother really wanted us to be stable in our schooling in high school and middle school. So we stayed in Washington state. So my father was based at Fort Lewis in Washington, and my siblings and I were born on McCord Air Force Base. And so we stayed in Washington state for quite some time while my father was deployed in several conflicts in the world. And that's where I went to high school, to Spanaway Lake High School. And it's, Washington is home for me. But I traveled extensively.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:20] Not a total army brat.

GRIGSBY: [00:03:22] Not a total army brat, but definitely in the sense that my family, we were, my family was very supportive of my father being that he was away a lot during my childhood on different deployments all

around the world. I was actually, my father was in Korea when I was born. And he also served in Germany, and he did several deployments abroad. And I think that's really what kind of opened my eyes. The first thing that opened my eyes to the world around us is just that, oh, Daddy's where? And my mom would show us on the map. Daddy's here or Daddy's there. So I knew that a wider world existed in my child mind, but I got the chance to explore that world as an adult.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:14] How many siblings do you have?

GRIGSBY: [00:04:16] We are one of four. I am the eldest daughter, but the third child.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:22] And where did you go to college?

GRIGSBY: [00:04:24] I went to college at the University of Washington. Go dogs! I am a Husky and there I did five years. I had to do a victory lap year. So I graduated in 2008. I started school in 2003 and I studied Spanish and international relations with a Latin American focus.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:51] Oh. And you actually went to the Peace Corps and spoke Spanish. A rare thing.

GRIGSBY: [00:04:58] Very rare.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:59] Many people say they spoke French or Spanish, and then they were sent far away, somewhere else.

GRIGSBY: [00:05:05] I actually did get the opportunity to speak the language that I studied, although I must say that studying a language in college does not mean you speak it. And I learned that for myself because although I had a degree in Spanish, the conversational Spanish, that piece I did not have. And looking back, I'm very grateful that I learned it the way I did with the theory and the grammar first and then really conversational and colloquial Spanish second because I could kind of code switch. So I could be very proper in Spanish and I could speak with my counterparts in the fields or in the villages with my Spanish that I

learned in the communities. So it was the best of both worlds and it definitely helped me in my service.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:00] So you graduated college in 2008. And then you joined the Peace Corps in 2013. What did you do in between?

GRIGSBY: [00:06:10] So my Peace Corps story was a winding road because I decided that I needed a graduate degree before I did anything. I worked for a year after I graduated from college, and then I decided to enter into the Peace Corps Master's International program, which no longer exists.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:30] Why don't you say what that is.

GRIGSBY: [00:06:32] So Peace Corps Master's International was an opportunity to get a graduate degree and do your fieldwork and your thesis as your Peace Corps service. So I completed my coursework at Rutgers University in New Jersey, and it was an accelerated program. It was one year of the most challenging, rigorous coursework that I've ever done. But the challenge everything prepared me for my Peace Corps service because that was not something that I don't think I expected what I went through in grad school. I was not expecting that. But thankfully it was a cohort program. So there were 12 other students in the classroom with me, and we all had the same classes at the same time. So everyone was suffering together, which really helps. After that, the Peace Corps Master's International program.

GRIGSBY: [00:07:34] But within that program, let me explain a little better. Everyone is a hopeful Peace Corps volunteer, so as you are going through your coursework in the university, you are also applying to the Peace Corps in tandem. So every, as we went closer and closer to the end of our graduating from the coursework section of our field of study, everyone would get letters from the Peace Corps saying they're getting their invitation letters. And each letter came, one letter came, two letters came, five, ten. And I just knew my letter would come any day. And unfortunately, my letter did not come. During the course of my

graduate studies, I went through the very rigorous medical evaluation for Peace Corps, and they found some red flags.

GRIGSBY: [00:08:34] They found that I had some kidney issues, and so they sent me in for further diagnostics and further testing to see what really was the issue. So I was in medical hold at the end of my coursework when everyone else in my cohort left for their various countries of service. I stayed in New Jersey to see what was wrong with me.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:06] So you didn't feel sick or anything?

GRIGSBY: [00:09:08] No, not at all. I was not sick in any way physically, you couldn't see it on me. My appearance was just fine. I felt fine, but internally there was something else going on. And so after all of the tests came back, I got the results and it turns out that I had a kidney disease called focal segmental glomerulosclerosis, which basically means that my kidneys had undergone some type of damage in my life before that moment. And so they were compromised. And so the doctors put me on a regimen just to see how my body would react to these different medications. And of course I was not accepted into the Peace Corps at the time that all of my other colleagues were leaving. I was on medical hold.

GRIGSBY: [00:10:10] So I went home to my parents and I lived with them for three and a half, almost four years in Chicago, where they're from. My parents are both born and raised in Chicago. After my father retired from the Army, they moved back home to Chicago to retire. So I moved back home with them. Thankfully, they took me in with open arms. And I got treatment and that lasted for upwards of 36 months. And in that time, I received a letter from the Peace Corps that said that I was not fit to serve and they were just going to not accept my application. I appealed that decision and submitted a new application, so I actually applied for the Peace Corps twice. The first time it was on paper. I did the paper application. And the second time they had done the switch to digital, and so I did the digital online application. So I got to see how the Peace Corps has evolved technologically a little bit in my journey to become a Peace Corps volunteer.

GRIGSBY: [00:11:27] So after my treatments, after these three and a half years that I spent getting better, I was able to get another application in. And of course, it was still pending, the results of my treatment to see if I was able to serve. Now, granted, the whole time I never felt any different than I feel today or that I felt when I first tried, when I first applied to the Peace Corps. But I think there's always a silver lining when things happen to you and you don't understand why in the moment. But had I not gone through that first application and the Peace Corps, had they not done this extensive medical evaluation of my body and internal organs that you just really don't pay attention to unless there's a problem. It could have been something very severe that could have completely damaged my organs, and then I would have been either on dialysis or no longer with us.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:36] So it was really fortunate.

GRIGSBY: [00:12:38] It was very fortunate. Peace Corps saved my life, basically.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:42] So you're totally free now?

GRIGSBY: [00:12:46] Right. I will always have a condition that requires me to be aware of my body, what I put into my body, how I treat my body. So my kidneys are definitely not out of the woods and they never will be. But I can control how much damage happens because now I know about it. So now I'm very, I'm very healthy. I've never not been healthy. But now I'm actively and conscious about the decisions that I make concerning my eating habits, exercising, the environments that I'm in, just to prolong the life of my kidneys for as long as possible.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:31] OK, so that's an unusual application process, right?

GRIGSBY: [00:13:37] Yes, it was a long, long.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:38] So they finally decided that your condition was stable enough so that you could join?

GRIGSBY: [00:13:44] Exactly. They did. But it was so random how it happened. There was no fanfare. There was no official letter. The letter came after the fact. But I just received a phone call in the middle of the day from headquarters from a young woman who asked me, we've received her application and we see that you have been in medical hold for a considerable amount of time. We have a post available in El Salvador. Do you accept? And I had to say yes or no at that moment, otherwise, my application just. It had been on hold for too long. So it was either do it now or not at all.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:29] And presumably you were working.

GRIGSBY: [00:14:32] I was working, you know, I had my life kind of going in Chicago, and I still had hope for my Peace Corps application. But it was not something that was top of mind in that time, you know, because my degree was still on hold too because I hadn't finished. Yeah, I hadn't finished my thesis. So in that time, they made an exception for me to do a different type of overseas assignment so I could at least get my graduate degree within those that timeframe. Because I was already three years out from when I originally did my coursework at the university. So in that time I went to China, but I got really sick in China and I was deported. So I came back to Chicago to live with my parents.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:23] You were deported?

GRIGSBY: [00:15:25] I was deported. So in China, when you. I was going to work as a teacher, teaching English in China. And in order to get my visa, working visa there, you have to go through another medical examination. And at that point, I had pneumonia or something. I had something going on in my lungs and they said, you have to go back home before and get better before you can be granted a visa to continue working. Because I had already, my tourist visa had expired at that point. So I stayed in China for three months and I was supposed to be there for a year but I never went back. And so I tried several different avenues to get this degree completed, get my coursework, my

overseas component done and my thesis written. But it just didn't happen for me in China either. So I came back.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:21] So did you ever get your master's?

GRIGSBY: [00:16:23] I did. Yes, I did finally get my master's. When I got this random phone call in, I believe it was June of 2013, from headquarters asking me if I would accept an assignment in El Salvador or just cancel my application altogether because it was just going to limbo for so long. So I accepted it on the spot. They sent me an official invitation a week or so later and I had exactly, I don't know, six, four to six weeks to pack up my life and move down to Central America, to El Salvador. And it was a whirlwind. It was a whirlwind. I was excited. I was scared. I was overwhelmed. I was anxious. But more than anything, I just felt like I had overcome the biggest hurdle to date in my life. It was so much, oh, praying.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:28] And your parents were okay with you going overseas?

GRIGSBY: [00:17:31] My dad was just thrilled. He just said, you go out there, do what you do best, leave it better than you found it. And my mom, of course, mothers. My mom was just, call me every day. Make sure you take your medicine. Don't do anything I wouldn't do. You're going to do great, but just make sure that you're in contact. Now, little did I know that having contact in the Peace Corps, it can mean very, very different things depending on where you serve and how far off the grid you are. And my site was probably one of the furthest off the grid.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:11] We'll get to that in a minute.

GRIGSBY: [00:18:12] We'll get to that. But my parents were very excited for me, very supportive throughout the whole process. And I couldn't be more grateful and thankful for the family that I have, just the family unit, that expectation of service. Not only that, but just the love and the care that they put into developing my siblings and I into adults that contribute to society overall.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:37] That's great.

GRIGSBY: [00:18:38] Kudos to them, Rob and Crystal Grigsby. Just awesome individuals and I love them so much.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:45] That's wonderful. So you packed up your life and where did you meet up with the rest of the group?

GRIGSBY: [00:18:51] So I flew in from Chicago. I missed my plane three times because I went to the wrong airport. There are two major airports in Chicago, Midway and O'Hare. For some reason, I don't know why, I went to Midway, which is the smaller of the two airports, instead of O'Hare. And so I missed every single flight. They had to rebook me three times in order to get there. I arrived at staging in Washington, D.C., I think a full five hours late, five or six. So I missed the first whole day almost. And I literally packed everything I had. I just I don't know what I was thinking. I was thinking that Peace Corps was going to be this glamorous just over the top fabulous place. I had, what I was wearing. I was wearing this really great pencil skirt with four-inch heels and a blazer and some type of shimmery sheer blouse and I mean, I was just way overdone. I didn't realize Peace Corps is.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:05] Not that fancy.

GRIGSBY: [00:20:07] Fancy at all. You don't need all that, but I packed. I thought I was going to be in meetings and talking to delegates and embassy people and, you know, leaders of the country. So I had all of my professional clothes neatly folded and packed and ready to go in my five suitcases. I had one person from hotel staff helped me bring in all my bags. I had so many. So when I walked in the door super late for staging all of the other Peace Corps volunteers just kind of turned and looked at me because they were in sessions like we love to do in the Peace Corps. And they turned and looked at me. Everyone said later on that they thought I was staff just coming in from D.C. to facilitate a session. But when they found out that I was actually a volunteer as well, everybody kind of marked me as the one who wouldn't make it. Like, oh, this girl has no idea what she's doing. So it was a great story

to hear when we all got together at the end of our service to just talk about what we went through together.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:16] So you did the staging and clearly you were dressed inappropriately.

GRIGSBY: [00:21:20] I was just so, I was overdressed. Way overdressed.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:23] You took your five suitcases.

GRIGSBY: [00:21:25] I did. I did. And learned immediately that that was way too much stuff. Because when we got to the airport, I think a day and a half, two days later, they said, OK, we're getting off of these 52 passenger busses and everybody has to get all their own bags. There was no one to pull the little cart for you, like it was in the hotel. So I was struggling with a backpack, a roller bag, two giant suitcases with wheels, and a duffel bag all by myself. And I said, oh my gosh, I just don't know, I just I don't know what I'm going to do. Somebody took pity on me and took one of my bags for me, but I started to realize at that point that this probably isn't what I thought I was going to be. But hey, I made it this far. Nothing was going to stop me. Nothing. If I have to take these clothes and leave them on the side of the street for someone, it's fine.

GRIGSBY: [00:22:23] I made it, got to the airport. We got on our plane. I got all my stuff checked in and it was fine. We were on our way. And I felt so relieved and just, ah. It was like this feeling of, wow, this is really happening to me. I finally did it. I did it. I got to the top of the mountain. But really, I only got to just the first base camp, I'm not at the top at all. So we got to, we flew to San Salvador and did our three month training in a community called Nuevo Cuscatlán right outside of El Salvador. I'm sorry, outside of San Salvador, the capital. And we were all assigned host families. And my host family just, they're just the sweetest, most loving people. And Mama Christina, my host sisters, everyone. Rosalina, all of the kids. So many children. But I lived in a neighborhood called Siete de Marzo. So it's March 7th. I don't know

why the streets are named after dates, and I don't know what's significant about March 7th.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:56] Must have been a revolution or something like that.

GRIGSBY: [00:23:58] Maybe, I'm not sure, but I lived in Siete de Marzo, and it was our little training community. Every day we would walk into Nuevo Cuscatlán and we rented out a little house there that we had our sessions and our classes and our Spanish classes as well.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:21] How many people were in your group?

GRIGSBY: [00:24:23] In my group, there was 15 altogether. So pretty small, pretty small.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:29] And these were all in community organization?

GRIGSBY: [00:24:32] Yes, we were all in community organization and economic development. Yes. But we lived. We lived together. Not everyone lived in Siete de Marzo, but we all lived very close by and we all walked together, or took the bus when we were feeling lazy, to go to Nuevo Cuscatlán to do our classes. But it was.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:57] How was the training? Was it helpful?

GRIGSBY: [00:24:59] Training was definitely helpful. I think there are some things that cannot be taught. You really learn on the job in the Peace Corps. But as far as culture, food, dynamics and the norms in different interactions with people. How to just be on your, be your best and represent not only yourself, but the United States, in the best way possible. A lot of people were concerned with me because not, most people did not think that I was American, as an African American woman. My training, my teachers and the different trainers in Nuevo Cuscatlán, they told me that I would be something that was very curious to people. People would look at me.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:02] That they haven't seen African Americans?

GRIGSBY: [00:26:04] No. There is not a large Afro population at all in El Salvador. I think in the two and a half years I was there, I maybe counted five or so.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:16] Were you the only African American in the group?

GRIGSBY: [00:26:18] In my group, yes. Yes, I was. Let me just go through my head real quick and make sure. Yes, I was. But going down the street, people would always come up to me. They would want to touch my hair. They would ask me questions about my skin. They would ask me about my nationality. I was always African. The people just did not believe that I was American because Americans don't look like me. Of course. And then they would just be so.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:48] Because you were black or because you were tall or?

GRIGSBY: [00:26:49] Because I was black, because I am black. And tall. Being tall was just hilarious to them because they, women, tall women is not something that they see at all in El Salvador. People are very short. They're very short and stout. So me being 6'2" and.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:09] And thin.

GRIGSBY: [00:27:09] Uh huh, and thin. A black woman who's single with no children and, oh my goodness, I was just. I might as well have been an alien because I was just everything that they didn't understand. So I actually took that as an opportunity to share my culture and to share just the things that I believed and the things that make me who I am. So it was an opportunity more than anything. And an opportunity to practice my Spanish.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:42] So let's just go back to training a bit. So did you have to go through Spanish training?

GRIGSBY: [00:27:46] I did.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:47] Even though you were a Spanish major?

GRIGSBY: [00:27:49] Yes. And I was so shocked and a little bit disappointed because I did not even place in the top Spanish group as far as conversationally. Not at all. I was in intermediate Spanish and I had. I could not believe it, but I have a degree. I have a degree in this. What do you mean that I am not superior? This makes no sense. What? But no, I was intermediate when I got to El Salvador and I had to go hash it out. I had to learn, you know, the conjugations and the sentence structures and the proper way to greet and the proper way to put together sentences and so many things. My vocabulary wasn't nearly as large as I thought it was, and just so many things.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:44] Tells you something about language instruction in this country.

GRIGSBY: [00:28:47] Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness. I was shocked. I was shocked. I had been studying Spanish since the ninth grade, probably a little earlier, probably seriously since the sixth grade. But when I got to college and that being my focus, it was all the time. All of my classes were in Spanish, so I knew I knew it. I understand this language but understanding and fluency is a very different thing. Speaking and being able to pick out the structure of a sentence. But the funny thing about it is going through Spanish classes made me understand the parts of speech in English better. So we learned how to speak English just naturally, just through conversation. Our parents, our surroundings, siblings.

GRIGSBY: [00:29:43] But learning Spanish, since I learned it backwards, I could pick out verbs and adjectives and nouns and gerunds and the conjugations and the different forms. The tu form, the I, the yo form, all of these, the ways that we speak to each other. And that made me understand, woah, structure in English is not quite the same, but now I can understand structure in a different way. So that was very helpful after I got outside of my ego and being so shocked.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:14] And then what was the training like for community organization and economic development?

GRIGSBY: [00:30:19] You know, the training was broad, I will say. There was so much to learn.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:27] What were you supposed to be doing in your program? Was that clear to you?

GRIGSBY: [00:30:36] No, not for me. But I will say that the staff in El Salvador, they wanted us to go into our sites with an open mind and open hearts more than anything. Don't go in as the American that knows everything. Go in as the American who wants to listen, who wants to learn, and who wants to assist. So that's what I did. The first year as a Peace Corps volunteer I just got to know people. I went to houses and I sat and drank lukewarm instant coffee and these little cookies, sugar cookies. And I would walk. My little village, it was one big circle, so I would walk it and I would hang out with the kids.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:34] So where were you assigned? So you finished training.

GRIGSBY: [00:31:37] I finished training, yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:38] Anything else you want to say about training?

GRIGSBY: [00:31:41] Training was helpful after the fact. I did not. I did not immediately see the value in training until I was well into my second year.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:55] And then it made sense.

GRIGSBY: [00:31:56] Then it made sense. And then the aha moments came almost daily.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:00] So what in retrospect was useful then, the listening part?

GRIGSBY: [00:32:07] The listening part and then the timing. There in El Salvador, people are not in a rush. They're not in a rush. They think things will get done in their own time. Things are there in order to bring people together. It's not necessarily about money. It's just all of these little golden nuggets that really kind of wash over American society as a whole. But just to be present and to just wait and to see how things happen. And maybe tweak something and then wait and see again. And then maybe if it needs another little tweak, try again.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:45] So you learned that in training or you learned that afterwards?

GRIGSBY: [00:32:48] I learned that that is actually a thing in training. Like this is something that people do? What? I learned that in training and maybe even subliminally, I learned that in training, and then it came full circle as a volunteer.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:04] That's great.

GRIGSBY: [00:33:04] But also my trainers in El Salvador were so attentive to us. They wanted to make sure that we had everything we need to be successful. Because El Salvador was a red country, meaning that we could not travel freely throughout El Salvador. We could not travel, use public transportation, that was not, um, that was restricted. We could not, we couldn't cross department borders. So all, uh, we had a shuttle system. Once a week or twice a week, the shuttle would come to different parts of the country and pick up volunteers and take them across department borders to different areas if we wanted to collaborate with other volunteers or if we needed to come to the city. It just really depends. And then. [dog barks]

GANZGLASS: [00:34:18] Excuse the distraction.

GRIGSBY: [00:34:20] No problem.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:21] So why couldn't you travel? What was going on in El Salvador at the time?

GRIGSBY: [00:34:28] There is a lot of socio-political strife going on. There was a lot of gang violence, MS-13 and the Mara Salvatrucha are prominent gangs. And priority number one is keeping the volunteer safe and in environments that they can be successful, healthy, and feel like they're safe. So even the capital in San Salvador where our headquarters is, our home office, it was off limits. We can only come to the capital for medical appointments, for emergencies, or if we were leaving the country, going to the airport, or coming back into the country.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:14] Wow.

GRIGSBY: [00:35:14] Other than that, we were not allowed to come to San Salvador. Before my time in El Salvador, the country had been evacuated so that the program was shut down for a number of years. I'm not sure how many. But we were one of, I think we were the second group that got to come in when they reopened the country in early 2000, I want to say 2000. You know, I don't even know the date, but it was two thousand and something when they reopened the country for another group of volunteers to come in.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:57] And where were you stationed?

GRIGSBY: [00:35:59] I was stationed in the Department of Morazán and it was right on the border of Honduras. In fact, my village was a 10 minute walk from the border. There was a river that separated us, the river San Antonio. And it was a river that my kids in the community loved to play in on hot days, which was every day.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:24] So was that a safe area?

GRIGSBY: [00:36:27] For me, absolutely. Because my village was so small. There was 250 people, men, women and children all living together in provisional housing that they've made out of mud bricks and hay and straw.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:40] So there were no gangs there.

GRIGSBY: [00:36:43] Oh no. And if there were little outcroppings of gangs, the children who were trying to to be of that mindset, the community leaders would stamp it out immediately.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:55] So the gangs were mostly in the city?

GRIGSBY: [00:36:58] Absolutely, mostly in the cities. So that's why the majority of our cohort were placed in rural areas. Very, very few of us were in cities or in large metropolitan areas.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:13] How did you get to the, how did you get to your town when you were placed there?

GRIGSBY: [00:37:18] When I was placed there, I was picked up by my community contact Glenda Argueta and the local alcalde, which is the mayor. They picked me up in the pickup truck of the nearest town and they drove me the eight hours. Felt like eight hours. I could probably get there in six, but I think that day we took a few stops because they wanted me to see the area and know about El Salvador. Salvadorans have so much pride for their country and they love their patria. So we stopped and we toured a little bit in the country before we got to my site. And they dropped me off at the bottom of this dusty road. It's not even a road. It was a path full of rocks and dirt, and it was lined with trees and stray dogs just everywhere. And they said, OK, well, this is it.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:25] So yeah.

GRIGSBY: [00:38:26] And that was it. That was the last time I rode in a car for many, many months.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:32] And you were alone.

GRIGSBY: [00:38:35] I was alone. Yes. I did not have another volunteer in my site. I think the closest volunteer to me was at least an hour and a half, two hours away on bus, although the distance may not have been so long. The route and the timing was much longer because it was winding

roads that went up and down mountainsides. None of the roads were paved at all. There was either dirt roads or roads made of stones kind of thrown together in a semi-organized manner. And the transportation. Once I hiked out of my site, which took about, when I got good at it, it took about 45 minutes. But when I started, it was at least an hour and 15 minutes, hour and a half, hiking straight up a hill to get out of my site into our neighboring town of Joateca. And that's where the busses would be.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:36] In the neighboring town?

GRIGSBY: [00:39:37] Mm hmm, in the neighboring town, the busses to anywhere outside of our community. And these busses were the same busses that I'm sure I rode when I was in elementary school. You know, the big yellow Blue Bell busses, but these are pimped out busses. They had all kinds of intricate designs and bright colors and bells and fringes and those big horns.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:04] But basically school busses.

GRIGSBY: [00:40:05] Yes, they were absolutely school busses. Absolutely. Sometimes they would have the back exit door just open so men could hang halfway out the bus. And I don't know, I thought, I guess it was something cool to do, if you hang out the bus. Everybody would fight for that back seat so you can kind of dangle your legs from the exit door. But of course, that was prohibited for us. But every then the busses only left three times a day and it was at 4:30 a.m., 5:00 a.m., and 5:45 a.m. If you missed those busses, you were stuck. So I remember many days.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:49] Why so early, to get into the big city?

GRIGSBY: [00:40:52] Because it took so long to get from Joateca, which is the largest neighboring town, to Gotera, which is where most people did all of their shopping. That was a three, three and a half hour ride. And you know, if you leave at 5:00 in the morning, then you'll get there by 8:00. And most people start opening up shops and doing all of their, you

know, their shopping and their just goings-about at that hour in the morning.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:20] And then you could get back?

GRIGSBY: [00:41:22] Then you could get back. There is a midday bus that went back. And so usually everybody would be on the midday bus coming back. But that was it. If you missed those three busses, you had to wait till the next day.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:34] So where did you live in this town?

GRIGSBY: [00:41:37] I lived in a little village called Estanzuela. Estanzuela was a suburb, and I use that term very loosely, of Joateca. It is a tiny town. All the houses are made of adobe, homemade adobe, and sink roofs. It is a very poor area. Most of the town really survived on agriculture. The cash crops were beans, coffee, and corn, and most of the men were farmers. They farmed land that they owned and had been passed down throughout the family or land that they rented from larger landowners. A lot of the children, and I should say adult children, had gone to the United States and a lot of families lived off of *remesas* that were sent back. So money sent back from family members that are working in the United States. So it was, you know, a very economically impoverished area, but people were so happy, so incredibly happy. And of course, there was me. I felt like the first at least six months I just struggled just to get the swing of life down.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:07] And you lived by, did you live by yourself?

GRIGSBY: [00:43:09] I did not. I lived with a host family. My mother's name was Sybilla, and Sybilla and I had a great relationship, but she wasn't an overbearing host mother at all. She kind of let me do what I needed to do, and if I ever needed anything, she was always there, willing and able to help. And the funniest thing about it was when I first arrived at my house, everybody just kind of looked at me and they said, well, you know, we were really hoping to get an American. I mean, you're cool. We'll keep you too. But when our American gets here, we're going to

have to give them the house that we set aside for them. But you can stay here for now. And that was.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:57] Because you were African.

GRIGSBY: [00:43:58] Yeah, because I was African to everybody. So I had to go through this process of proving myself that, no, I'm actually the volunteer that you solicited. It's me and there's no one else coming, just me. But they were like, no, I mean, you can stay, but just know when the real volunteer gets here, we'll have to move you to another place. They were very gentle in telling me this.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:23] Wait, do you think they were? Were they discriminating against you? Or just that you were strange?

GRIGSBY: [00:44:29] I think that they were utterly confused, just like, what? I thought we were getting an American.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:36] But in El Salvador, they don't have racial differences?

GRIGSBY: [00:44:39] There definitely are. There is, in my mind, there's a lot of discrimination against people of indigenous heritage. So the darker you are, they say *indios*. You look like an *indio* because you have a darker complexion, and those are indigenous people.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:01] And they are discriminated against?

GRIGSBY: [00:45:04] Oh yeah, absolutely. Definitely.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:06] So it must have been a relief for once.

GRIGSBY: [00:45:09] It was just very interesting because there were so many things going on, just the juxtaposition of me being black and American, but not quite American enough. And because I was dark-skinned, but I think just me being an American superseded everything. As the American, it doesn't really matter that you're black. OK, we'll take that, and we'll just ask you a lot of questions to see if you're actually.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:41] American.

GRIGSBY: [00:45:41] American. You're a woman and you're single? That's, well, that's OK. We will take it, whatever.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:50] But what's wrong with you?

GRIGSBY: [00:45:51] Yeah. Everyone wanted to ask me, now why aren't you married? Why don't you have kids? Do you know how old you are? Because, you know, as a Peace Corps volunteer, I was in my late 20s when I started, and by the time I finished, I was 31, 30. I think I was 31. And so I was way beyond the power curve. Just most people in my age group had at least three children going on four or five at that point. So especially when I had my women's group, I would talk about women's issues and everybody would look at me like, but you're not even a woman yet. How can you tell us about the things that we're going through and how to help ourselves when you're not a woman yourself? So their perception of womanhood and what it is to have a place in society, just the whole hierarchy within the society, depends on your status as a woman. Who you are, have you given birth? Are you married yet? Do you still live with your parents? Just where are you on the totem pole.

GRIGSBY: [00:47:02] So I just was this outlier who didn't speak Spanish well enough, wasn't who I said I was, quote unquote. No children, no husband, living outside of my parents' house. And now I am here to assist in this community. And my focus, I wanted my focus to be on women and young girls. And so they were looking at me like, so what do you have to offer us? You have no idea.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:35] That's a good question. What is it that you had to offer them?

GRIGSBY: [00:47:39] I found that out later. I found out that a lot of women were forced to be strong and not show signs of weakness because within their society, it would bring them down as a whole. So women went

through a lot of abuse, verbal, mental, sexual, physical abuse in town or just in life. And they carried these burdens with them and they were, it was hidden. These are secret types of burdens. And so I was there to be a sounding board for them. And in these situations where they couldn't speak for themselves, I gave them the tools to be able to put words to these feelings that they had. To be able to talk about some of the things they went through and find a community within the group of women that could support one another.

GRIGSBY: [00:48:47] And that was a foreign concept to them because everybody just kept that on the inside, kept it to themselves. These are not things that you share. These are not things that you talk about because you don't. We know that it happens to everybody, but that's just life. That's just what happens. And deal with it. So I definitely would say that part of my role there as a Peace Corps volunteer was giving that feeling a voice, being able to create a dialog in these women in a safe environment that they could honestly speak to themselves and speak to one another as friends, as family members.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:29] Must have been hard for them to do that.

GRIGSBY: [00:49:31] Oh, that took the entire two years of service to get to the point where people would just even talk to each other about these very intimate, very deep-rooted feelings that they've carried with them for their lifetimes. And I will say that it was just, it's a family unit. There was only three last names in my whole village. And so they were Blanco, Pereira, and Argueta, were the three last names that everyone had. And so.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:03] So you can't really escape.

GRIGSBY: [00:50:04] No, you can't. Because it's so entrenched. It's everybody knows everybody and everyone is related to everyone. So, yeah, you know exactly who you're talking about when you're telling the story of what happened to you as a child, or when you were just married off to such-and-such a person, how this individual treated you. All of these

things. They're each other's family members. So it was a difficult process, but necessary.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:35] Are there repercussions when somebody says something? Does it get back to the man?

GRIGSBY: [00:50:41] I'm sure it does. I'm sure it does. But by the end of the service, the women were strong enough as a unit to not allow any one woman to be singled out. So there it was definitely power in numbers. And I hope that it continued even after I left. But I cannot say for sure that it is still a strong unit, the strong unit that we built together in those two years. I hope so. I honestly and truly hope so.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:20] What did you do? So you just got to meet them. And how did you end up pulling this group together?

GRIGSBY: [00:51:29] My projects came organically. I knew of my focus. I know what I wanted my focus to be, but I did not have a map to how to make that happen. It took, like I said before, it took a year of just sitting with people and talking with people and drinking lots of lukewarm coffee and instant. I forget the name of the coffee we used to drink.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:01] Nescafe?

GRIGSBY: [00:52:01] Yeah, it was Nescafe! Yes, it was. It was Nescafe. It was terrible. But we drank it every day.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:10] Which is strange for a country that grows coffee.

GRIGSBY: [00:52:12] Exactly. Their coffee is exported. And when they can get a significant financial gain from the products that they grow, of course, they're going to send their best overseas for export and just they'll take what's the sloppy seconds. So we had Nescafe. So we did that and it was a year of being patient, which is not my strong suit. It was a year of being quiet, which is also hard for me. To listen and just accept that reality in that moment, this is what's happening. I saw it all around me. What do I need to do to change it? But of course, as a person who I

am in our society, we see a problem. We have to fix it immediately. Fix, go, put. What can I do to make this right? Do it. But in El Salvador, you cannot rush because it will fall apart. And you have to act appropriately within the culture. So just the fact that I am a woman myself and I don't fit into their description of womanhood, I had to walk very carefully. It is a very fine line on how to address this issue.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:41] What did your host mom say to all of us?

GRIGSBY: [00:53:44] You know, my host mom, she was not really involved in my project. She was older. She's well into her 80s and she stayed at the house. Her job was making sure her house was spotless, and she did a phenomenal job doing that. I know no one else, actually probably everyone else got up every morning before the sun came out to sweep a dirt floor. I did not understand why people swept dirt floors until the end, and it was all about presentation. I am making what I have, which is not much, the best that I can make it, so I will sweep this dirt floor until it looks like it's not even dirt. And she did that. She washed dishes. She prepared meals.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:32] You had running water in the house?

GRIGSBY: [00:54:35] No, we did not. We used what's called a pila and a pila is like a tiny little swimming pool. It's like a concrete holding cell for water. And we had a certain amount of water each day to use for our bathing, for our washing dishes, washing clothes, for preparing meals, and for drinking water. It was not a lot. I would say, if I could measure it in my mind, it had to be maybe 25 gallons and that might be pushing it, of water a day. Twenty five gallons or less of water a day.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:17] For the whole household?

GRIGSBY: [00:55:18] For the whole household. And my house was almost like a community house because my host mother ran a little store where she sold *dulces*, different candies and different baked goods, cookies and churros, which are chips. She sold household wares and you could get utensils and little plates and things from her, as well as just your

basics, your eggs and flour and all of those small things that you need on a daily basis. Because there was no store in my town. There was no store in Joateca. Well, there was a few, but it wasn't like a grocery store like we know grocery stores. There was a person who sold meat, a cart that sold eggs. In my town, which was 45 minutes down the mountain, there everyone grew their food, so I had all kinds of vegetables. I had tomatoes and I had the onions and I had green peppers and I had all of those things. And then just the fruit that grew naturally on trees they had. Orange season was fantastic. All types of bananas and *platinos* and mangoes. Oh my goodness, the mangoes. Cacao, *aguacate*. What is that in English?

GANZGLASS: [00:56:35] Avocado.

GRIGSBY: [00:56:38] Avocado. Thankfully, we had all of these vegetables and fruits all around us. But actually, when I was in Peace Corps, I became vegetarian because access to meat was so limited and you actually had to kill your meat if you wanted it. So I just could never get enough strength to break the chicken's neck in half and then pluck it and then strip it and wash it. And I just said, you know what? I will not eat meat.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:08] Eat beans.

GRIGSBY: [00:57:09] And that's what I had. I had beans and rice every single day. I ate a lot of eggs. They make this cheese called *cuajada*, and it can be very salty. But I learned to love it. And then, of course, you can never get your fill of tortillas. And that was one of the running jokes in my service is, how many tortillas can Asiha eat? And everyone was just so shocked that I could only finish one, maybe one and a half, because they were just so thick. In El Salvador, they're about the size of a small bowl around, and they're just thick. Maybe half an inch thick.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:50] Very different.

GRIGSBY: [00:57:50] Very different from the tortillas that I had in my mind, which can fold to make tacos.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:56] Yeah.

GRIGSBY: [00:57:56] Yeah, no. It's more, it's used like a utensil. Rather than using forks and spoons, people just eat with a tortilla. They use their two, their pointer finger and their index finger and then their thumb. And they get your tortilla and you get a bit of beans and rice and you scoop it up with your tortilla and you just eat the whole thing.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:20] So did you travel around the country as well or?

GRIGSBY: [00:58:22] No.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:23] You couldn't. Because of the restrictions.

GRIGSBY: [00:58:25] Because of the restrictions, I didn't travel much around the country, but I took it upon myself to be a part of the VAC, which is the Volunteer Advisory Committee. It's like ASB for Peace Corps volunteers.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:40] What is that?

GRIGSBY: [00:58:42] ASB, you know, if you go back to middle school and high school, it was your student advisory board.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:47] Oh.

GRIGSBY: [00:58:49] So it was the same thing, but for volunteers. So once a month, every six weeks, something like that, we chose a different place to go around the country to have our VAC meetings. So all the volunteers. There is one from each cohort and, or two, two from each cohort, that were the representatives for their cohorts. And we went to different places all around El Salvador. That was the only way I traveled, with VAC.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:21] So you did get quite a bit.

GRIGSBY: [00:59:23] I did. But as far as getting to know the area, I would say no. We would go and we'd stay overnight in a hotel, which was always the thrill of VAC meetings. We got showers with running water and a bed with sheets and so many creature comforts that we did not have in our sites. So it would honestly be just an escape, rest and relaxation one night in the hotel room. Oh my goodness, we got to do it on VAC, yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:56] Good.

GRIGSBY: [00:59:56] That was. That's what I did.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:58] So you did that for two years?

GRIGSBY: [00:59:59] I did. I did that for two years.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:01] And then how did you end up re-upping in Panama?

GRIGSBY: [01:00:06] In Panama. So I had a four month gap between my service in El Salvador to my service in Panama.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:14] Many people stay a third year, but you chose not to stay a third year.

GRIGSBY: [01:00:18] I chose not to stay a third year, even though I wanted to, because they shut down El Salvador.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:26] Oh.

GRIGSBY: [01:00:27] So when I COSed in September of 2015, I -- so closed my service is COS -- I flew back home to Chicago. And in January they had shut down El Salvador as a Peace Corps country because of problems in security, just because of the violence of the threat of gangs and the government deemed that it was not a safe place to have a Peace Corps program.

GANZGLASS: [01:01:05] So you couldn't stay at the?

GRIGSBY: [01:01:06] No, I could not. The program was officially closed at that point.

GANZGLASS: [01:01:10] But you finished your second year?

GRIGSBY: [01:01:12] Yes, my group was the last group to actually COS. So all of the people in my cohort closed their service having done the full two years. The group that came after me did not. And I think there's actually two groups that had come in after me, and they did not. They were all taken out of the country and given options for different assignments in other countries, or to just close their service as a shortened service. So I was very happy for that, but very sad that the program in El Salvador was closed at that point.

GANZGLASS: [01:01:50] So you went home and then went to Panama.

GRIGSBY: [01:01:53] I did. I went home in September and it was just so cold and dark and I was used to tropical weather. I was used to, you know, fruit on the trees and sun blazing down on you and just being extraordinarily hot. And then I come to Chicago in the late fall and when winter hit, I just said, I can't. I've had, I cannot do it. I've had enough. I'm going back to what I know. So I decided to take a position as a Response volunteer in Panama. So I did Panama, Peace Corps Response in Chiriquí, Panama, which is the northern border of Panama, right with Costa Rica. I worked as a small business consultant for an organic farming cooperative that specialized in mostly leafy greens, but also they grew carrots and all types of citrus fruits. They specialized in kale though, different varieties of kale. I always had fresh fruit and vegetables every day.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:04] And this was a, I'm sorry this was a co-op that you worked with?

GRIGSBY: [01:03:06] It was a co-op. It was about nine farmers, and I helped them with their business plan. They were trying to broaden their scope and enter into a more commercial market in Panama City and work with different retailers there to get organic food on the shelves and help it

become more mainstream for the public. And they did make inroads. It was really good. They started working with this boutique grocer called Mercadito Biológico, which is basically the biologic market in Panama City. And they did well. They are growing. What they do well, they are incredible farmers, master farmers. They know how to grow organically. But what they struggled with was making a profit off of their products.

GRIGSBY: [01:04:11] So they saw themselves as people feeding good food to their friends and neighbors. But as business people, they just didn't see how you have to upsell. You have to mark up your prices. You cannot sell this at cost because then you are really hurting yourself because you're not able to. That's not a sustainable model at all. So that point there was the probably the most difficult for them to understand. Because what they want is they want people to be healthy and happy and have that the food they grow nourish. And that's very simple. I want my friends and neighbors to have the food that they need to be healthy. But in the business world, you need to make money. So I was brought in to help them.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:06] So how long were you working with them?

GRIGSBY: [01:05:09] I worked with them for 14 months.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:13] Oh. So Response, I always thought Response was a very short period.

GRIGSBY: [01:05:17] It is. It depends on the assignment how long your actual project will be.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:23] Oh.

GRIGSBY: [01:05:24] So it can be anywhere from three months to a year or beyond. My assignment originally started off as a year, and I extended it for a couple of months longer to meet the goals that we set for ourselves.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:39] So by that time, you were speaking Spanish well.

GRIGSBY: [01:05:42] Oh yeah, by that time I was excellent.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:45] And where did you live then? Did you live in a city?

GRIGSBY: [01:05:48] I lived. I wouldn't call it a city, but it was definitely a large town. The town of Volcán inside of Chiriquí is actually a expat destination, an up and coming expat destination. I had a lot of American retirees who lived nearby and had these super giant homes. We had paved roads. We had actual grocery stores. We had a Super Selectos, I believe, was out there and was it Super Selectos? I don't remember the name, but we actually had a grocery store there. We had restaurants. There in Volcán was Volcán Barú, and that volcano is a hiker destination in Panama. People love to hike the trail, to get to the crater up there.

GRIGSBY: [01:06:50] So it was a tourist destination and very different, very different from El Salvador. I think if I had done it in reverse, going from Panama to El Salvador, I would not have made it. But the fact that I started in the most rural, most off the grid, no toilet, no running water, no nothing, no windows, the animals all over me, insects, dengue. And then I went to Panama. It was just, wow, this is the life. I can actually take a bus to wherever I want to go.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:27] And there was no violence.

GRIGSBY: [01:07:28] No, I never experienced violence. I never had any fears. It was very.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:38] Did people think you were strange being African American in Panama?

GRIGSBY: [01:07:42] I think in that area, since it was such a high tourist destination, there has been many different faces and nationalities coming through there. So they were used to people from around the globe and they were used to foreigners. So, no, I wasn't as much of a

shock. I still think that people were really like, wow, you're so tall, why are you so tall? But other than that, it was fine. It was fine. Occasionally, I would get people who would ask me, where are you from? And why do you speak Spanish so well? And a lot of people would think that I was from Colón. And Colón is in the canal zone and it is an Afro Caribbean, Afro Panamanian people down there. It's a region. Basically black people that are there. So a lot of people would think that I was from Colón in Panama. Then I tell them, no, I'm American. And then they would say, oh OK, then that would be that.

GANZGLASS: [01:08:49] So you did that for a year. And then you came home or did you travel?

GRIGSBY: [01:08:54] Well, I did travel. I backpacked through Central America once I completed my service in Panama. I started off in Panama and went all the way up to Mexico. It was quite a trip. I was.

GANZGLASS: [01:09:09] By yourself?

GRIGSBY: [01:09:10] Yes, by myself. I was so excited. That was what I wanted. I wanted to be in the world traveling with just the things on my back and the open road in front of me going on this epic adventure. Asih against the world. Let's go.

GANZGLASS: [01:09:27] I forgot to ask whatever happened to all the clothes you brought?

GRIGSBY: [01:09:31] Oh, I left them in my site. I couldn't. I went home from El Salvador twice. Once to graduate. I finally got my master's degree. I wrote my thesis on the patio of my host mother's home with a power cord slammed into the only outlet that we had. And I flew home in May of 2015 to walk at Rutgers for my graduation. I wanted that, that I felt like that was just coming full circle for me. So I walked across the stage then. And then I came home once again after a serious illness that I had in El Salvador. And I'm so thankful that they did not medical separate me from my service because I had dengue and I was hospitalized for about three weeks. But I was able to go home and just

get some love and nourishment from my mom. I think that's all I needed. And put her fears at rest. And then I went back and finished my service.

GANZGLASS: [01:10:47] So then after Panama, you went hiking through Central America?

GRIGSBY: [01:10:51] I did. I backpacked through Central America. It was awesome until I tore my MCL in Nicaragua. But what happened was I wanted that epic journey. I wanted that for me. Every moment of that trip there was always somebody along the way. Hey, come with us. We're going to this place. Or hey, do you need help? No problem. I know exactly what you need. There's always someone in my path to help me, and I kind of wanted to struggle a little bit and I didn't at all. But backpacking was awesome. I encourage everyone to do it. It will show you how strong you are and how beautiful the world is and how wonderful perfect strangers are, usually.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:36] That's great.

GRIGSBY: [01:11:37] So I want to do it again. And Nicaragua is where my trip turned a little more challenging because I went volcano boarding on Cerro Negro in, um. Was it in Ometepe? In a town in, no, it was. It was in Granada. No, it wasn't. I don't know where I was. Anyway, Cerro Negro is the little mountain and you get on a toboggan. You hike up this mountain with a toboggan, get to the top, and you get to slide down. But the objective is to break the speed record, and of course, being competitive as I am, I said, I'm going to break the speed record. I am going to be the one that the record books have down as the fastest female going down Cerro Negro.

GRIGSBY: [01:12:24] So I got on my toboggan. You have to sit your bottom on the wooden platform and then glide your feet on top of the volcanic rocks just for stability. But if you want to go faster, you have to pull your feet off of the rocks and just lean back. Balance on your sit bones on your bottom and go as fast as you can down the mountain, and it had a pretty hardcore slope. So that's what I did from the beginning. I was

going so fast. I'm sure they clocked me at 65 miles an hour going down. And then I just felt like I was going out of control, so I put my feet down. But there is a part of that journey, once you put your feet up, you can't really reverse it because then you're going too fast, and that's just.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:24] So what did you do to yourself?

GRIGSBY: [01:13:26] So instead, when I put my feet down, the heel of my left foot got caught and it chicken winged the wrong way. So I tore my MCL in my left knee, and thankfully I didn't really feel it when it happened. I heard it when it happened and I got to the bottom. I tried to stand up and I couldn't. And I said, oh, I'm just must have lost my footing. Let me try it again. I tried to put weight on my left foot. I couldn't. I fell down. And finally, this group of guys just picked me up and put me in the truck because I couldn't walk at that point. Everyone else completed their runs just fine. I was the only injured person after the event. But I didn't know the severity of my injuries. I just thought, you know, maybe I sprained my knee or something. Something happened, but it's not bad. So I'm just going to continue backpacking.

GRIGSBY: [01:14:17] I iced it for two days in my little hostel, Bigfoot Hostel, and I had a 50 pound backpack that I was carrying at the time. And I couldn't. I couldn't go anywhere because I couldn't walk. So I practiced walking just with my body weight, and I got that down more or less. And so I practiced with half of a backpack and I could with some pain. But I was in Nicaragua by myself. I did not know what to do. I couldn't just stay there. So I said, let me just make it back to El Salvador to my host family and go to the doctors out there. Since I know the country, I know the doctors. I've lived there. I'll be fine. So I took an overnight bus, which I heard was really bad to do after the fact, from Nicaragua to El Salvador to go to my host family's house.

GRIGSBY: [01:15:17] And when my host family saw me, they said, oh my gosh, Mariana. My name, I changed my name while I was in El Salvador because no one could say Asiha. So my middle name is Maryanne, and I became Mariana for my two years of service. They said, oh my

goodness, Mariana, what happened to you? I guess I was, I looked flushed. I had lost weight, my knee was so swollen that I couldn't even bend it. So I stayed in El Salvador for a month and a half just resting, because I could do nothing for myself. And when I went and got x-rays done, I did see that I had a torn MCL and that's where my backpacking journey ended.

GANZGLASS: [01:16:06] So you stayed and it was healed in El Salvador and could you then come home?

GRIGSBY: [01:16:10] I had a lot of different opinions. Everyone thought you need surgery, go get surgery now. And so at that point, I did not have medical insurance anymore. Because after, I think it's three months, two months or three months, and you don't get medical insurance with the Peace Corps anymore. So I was not covered. So I said, OK, it would cost less to have surgery here than it would to have surgery in the United States. So I was all for having a surgery in El Salvador. I had complete confidence in them. These are my people. Of course they'll take care of me. But my father was not at all on board with that idea. He demanded that I come home immediately and be seen by doctors and the whole nine yards. So after my initial set of scans came back, I got a second opinion. Because the first doctor, he just looked at it and said, yep, surgery, let's do it.

GRIGSBY: [01:17:05] The second doctor said, you know what? You didn't completely tear your MCL into pieces. It's just a rip. So if you stay off of it, this is something that could heal itself, but you must stay off of it. And I said, OK, I can do that. No surgery. Cool. Yes, win. But I stayed in my host family's house for a month and a half, and then I finally said, OK, Dad. I'll just come home. So I ended up going back to Chicago and resting there for, goodness, how long? A long time. And yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:17:49] It healed?

GRIGSBY: [01:17:49] I'm healed. It healed. I did not have to have surgery. Now I do feel my knee. You know, usually you don't feel your body at all. It just works when you need it to. At least in my young mind, that's how

it's supposed to be. You don't feel your body. It just works. So now I notice that my knee cracks and I have to stretch it and it gets stiff and I feel the weather now. I can feel.

GANZGLASS: [01:18:14] Maybe you should have had surgery.

GRIGSBY: [01:18:18] I can just feel the rain coming on because my knee gets a little sore. I said, oh no, it's going to rain, I can tell. I could feel it in my knee. But it is, uh, it's funny, just the things that you go through and the demands that we put on our bodies.

GANZGLASS: [01:18:33] So when you think back on your whole Peace Corps experience, what's been the impact on you?

GRIGSBY: [01:18:41] My whole life has changed. Everything I do and all of the opportunities that I have, the job I currently have, is because of Peace Corps. The connections that I have with people have completely changed. I think my mother often tells me, Asiha, I need you not to chastise everyone you come across who is American and has not had the experiences that you had because first world problems exist too. I used to get on my mom all the time about letting the water run when she's washing dishes and not recycling everything and separating it by color and size and not eating every piece of rice on your plate because there's people who don't have that. She said, Asiha, please, please.

GRIGSBY: [01:19:34] But just little things, just seeing the humanity in people and learning to love unconditionally. And I'm still working on that. Seeing how people with less who have very little will often give their last to a perfect stranger. It has helped me to want more of this big, beautiful world that we have. I want to. I want to give something beautiful to the generations that come behind me. I want to. I want to see the good and I want to believe that people care, and I want to believe that people want to be together rather than separated. I think we need to build bridges instead of walls.

GRIGSBY: [01:20:26] I think we have so much to do as a community, as a global community, and often our small differences shield us from that. We

don't allow ourselves to see that we're more similar than we are different. And Peace Corps taught me that. It was just I was thrust into an environment that welcomed me with open arms, beside the fact that I was African, and loved me and cared for me and I became a part of their family.

GANZGLASS: [01:21:04] Are you still in touch with them?

GRIGSBY: [01:21:05] I am. I went back to visit El Salvador last summer and I stayed with everyone in the community because when you go, you cannot just go and see a couple of people. You have to stop by everyone's house. You have to have coffee with every person, ask about their.

GANZGLASS: [01:21:23] And it's still lukewarm, right?

GRIGSBY: [01:21:24] And it's still lukewarm. It's still really, really gross. But I drink it with a smile and with a warm heart because I get to share these moments with people who love me unconditionally. They just love me, and they honestly, they got a little jealous. They would get very, very like protectionists. I went to do a project in another site, collaborating with another volunteer who was close, quote unquote close by. And my community felt like I had just abandoned them because I went for a week to another community to do a project. And they just said, Asiha, are you leaving? What is this? Do you? Are you? Is there something we did? Are they taking you away from us? And I said, calm down, it's OK. So in a way, I was theirs. I was something that belonged to them.

GANZGLASS: [01:22:20] And they weren't any volunteers before you or after so you were the one.

GRIGSBY: [01:22:24] I was the one. I was their volunteer. So going back is always a pleasure. I want to go at least every year or every other year. And cell phones are huge down there, so it's easy to Facetime them or everyone uses WhatsApp, so just sending little text messages and getting that connection is very important.

GANZGLASS: [01:22:47] Have you stayed connected to the Peace Corps here?

GRIGSBY: [01:22:50] I am. I'm deeply connected to Peace Corps here. I'm in the Peace Corps network. It has helped me become more familiar with the area, just coming from another state and another country, coming from Panama. So getting into that network was very important. As soon as I got back to the U.S., I plugged in just to feel grounded. That's one of the biggest mistakes I made coming from El Salvador is I didn't plug myself in. So that transitional period from Peace Corps to regular civilian American life was that much more difficult because I had no one to release my frustrations with and to bounce ideas off of, to vent to. No one, I felt like my family and my friends before me were expecting the old me to come back, but I was a completely different person, so no one could really understand. My dad did, just because the military. Deployments and Peace Corps service are very different. But he understood that shock of coming back to your old life. But I needed that and I didn't know I needed that.

GRIGSBY: [01:24:00] So the second time around, I got it right. I plugged into the Peace Corps network before I even got back, and I had a group of people to welcome me back home and to get me plugged into different resources and opportunities. My boss, the job that I worked at USA Rice right now, she is a returned Peace Corps volunteer as well. So Peace Corps changed my life and made me who I am.

GANZGLASS: [01:24:25] Yeah. Do you think Peace Corps has had an impact on the United States?

GRIGSBY: [01:24:29] Absolutely. Absolutely. I will go to in my travels abroad and I will tell people I'm a returned Peace Corps volunteer. I served in El Salvador and Panama. And everyone has a story of, oh, I was a child and a Peace Corps volunteer came to my village in the '70s and he taught me how to say the ABCs in English. Or somebody always has. It surprises me, just the reach of the Peace Corps in these last 50 years because we are everywhere. And no matter where you go Peace Corps stories are often pretty interchangeable, so it is just, it's a pleasure to be considered a returned Peace Corps volunteer among so

many amazing people. I love the fact that I can put that badge of honor on my lapel as something that I did, something that I gave. At first I did it because I wanted to be cool and speak another language. But coming back from that, I received so much more as a Peace Corps volunteer for my community than I ever gave that I almost think it's a little unfair.

GANZGLASS: [01:25:47] Everybody says that.

GRIGSBY: [01:25:48] But yes, the Peace Corps changes the world and it will continue to do so. We just need support. We need money. We need dedicated volunteers to continue filling out those applications and continue to make those selfless acts to go around the world and serve in the most pure, most loving way that you can.

GANZGLASS: [01:26:13] I think that's a good place to end. Ok, thank you.

GRIGSBY: [01:26:17] Thank you.

GANZGLASS: [01:26:18] Excellent.

[END OF INTERVIEW]